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The various forms of folklore are identified and suggestions are made on the use of some of them in the daily language lesson for the development of cultural understanding and language skills. Folk tales, proverbs, riddles, and regional slurs are discussed along with the French cultural themes and value systems they illustrate. A brief annotated bibliography is provided. (AF)

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French Culture: The Folklore Facet

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FRENCH CULTURE: THE FOLKLORE FACET

The ultimate reward of studying a foreign language is to achieve a true rapport with the people who speak, write, read, and feel in that language. Thanks to linguistic science and audiolingual strategies, we are doing a better job of teaching students to speak, to read, and to write the language. It is time now to teach them to feel.

Concern for the area of "feeling" is reflected in the current interest in the teaching of culture. Familiarity with the literary heritage of a people has long been considered essential to cultural understanding. Now other dimensions are recognized as vital, including a knowledge of the traditional patterns of behavior within the culture and an insight into the people's way of looking at their world.

It has been suggested, for example, that by Level II of his language study a student should be able to ". . . define and illustrate at least six main themes of the value system" of a given culture; to state ". . . a few component value-concepts and underlying assumptions," and to "Recognize obvious manifestations of the six selected themes in an unfamiliar dialogue, literary text, or visual representation of nonverbal behavior."[1]

One area of culture which combines this anthropological orientation with the humanistic qualities of literature is the study of folklore.

The Nature of Folklore

Scholars have described folklore in terms of its origin, its form, its function in society, and the method of its transmission. Although folklore is usually thought of as being something in oral circulation, some types of folklore circulate exclusively in written form – epitaphs and graffiti, for instance. Other forms are transmitted by strictly visual encounters, such as the observer who learns the steps of a dance from watching the dance itself.

The folk who develop the lore are not limited to rustic peoples in the backwash of civilization. Any group of people – city dwellers, suburbanites, astronauts, farmers, or foresters – produces folklore. The size of the group may vary from a single family unit to an entire race, as long as they share some common factor.

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Folklore takes an impressive variety of forms, including folktales, riddles, legends, myths, jokes, proverbs, chants, charms, curses, insults, blessings, taunts, toasts, and tongue-twisters. Folk songs, folk similes, folk metaphors, epitaphs, and nicknames are included, as well as folk rhymes, folk drama, folk medicine, and folk art. Teachers should be aware of gestures and their significance; of traditional comments made after sneezes and yawns; of mnemonic devices; of abbreviations (S.W.A.K.: Sealed With A Kiss); and of practical jokes like "The Snipe Hunt" which reflect a culture's humor. In addition, holiday and festival observances, games, and dances fall into the category of folklore; so do designs and symbols, superstitions and slang.[2]

From this list, it is clear that folklore makes up an important component of the total culture. To ignore it as we have in the past, or to dismiss it with a few stanzas of Frère Jacques on Friday afternoon, is to deprive our students of a significant segment of French culture.

Folklore in the Language Program

There are two approaches to the inclusion of folklore in the language program. One which has been used successfully by some ambitious schools is the public staging of a folk festival or "Foreign Language Night" – a spectacle of costumed dancers and folk singers, with foreign foods sometimes offered for sale and a display of projects made by the students. Handled intelligently, such a production can teach some aspects of culture and at the same time promote enthusiasm for the language program. But its preparation takes time away from the acquisition of language skills, and the organizational headaches involved discourage most teachers.

A more feasible approach is to incorporate the teaching of folklore into the daily lesson. This is being done to a limited extent in the FLES program, where the random inclusion of songs, riddles, rhymes, and tales has proved effective. At the secondary level folk songs are often used to break the monotony of pattern drills and directed dialogue. But folklore has a great deal more to offer. As a means of teaching culture, its potential remains largely untapped.

Ideally the language teacher should have a wealth of lore and literature at his command so that insights into the French way of looking at the world can be given spontaneously: a proverb to underscore an attitude; an alliterative dicton to drill a difficult phoneme; a joke to illustrate the concept of méfiance; an anecdote to explain why the French say "Dieu vous bénisse" when someone sneezes; the explanation behind a reference to "le vase de Soissons."

Our students are unaware of the folk motifs and personalities that every Frenchman has unconsciously assimilated into his cultural frame of reference. Knowledge of this folk heritage would enable them to make sense out of allusions that they now find meaningless. It would help them analyze formal French literature. And certainly it would give them an appreciation of the international role of folklore in literature, for while the folk tale types and motifs reach deep into the historical past, they also stretch across geographical boundaries.

As a case in point, consider Camus' play Malentendu, which tells the story of the son who returns incognito to surprise his family and is murdered by his unsuspecting mother and sister. Camus himself believed that this was "a true story." He had read a newspaper clipping before the war which related the event as having happened somewhere in Czechoslovakia. He was unaware that this is actually a folk tale (Type 939A in the Aarne-Thompson Type Index) which has been in oral circulation for hundreds of years. So impressed was Camus with the irony in this "true" tale that he mentioned it again in the novel l'Étranger.

Bringing an insight such as this to the class that is studying Malentendu or l'Étranger can add a new dimension. It can be made even more relevant to American students by pointing out that "Tale Type 939A" is told today in southern Ohio, only there the villain is Billy Potts, member of the notorious Cave-in-Rock gang which terrorized travelers in the early 19th century. By pointing out the universality of Camus' plot, the teacher can introduce the student to the great pool of international folklore which underlies much of our contemporary literature.

Folklore can also illuminate cultural themes and help to clarify value systems. Consider the French tendency – motivated by their basically intellectual approach to life

– to analyze the world in a logical way. Ever since Descartes, and perhaps before, the French have stressed the rational. As André Maurois put it, "The French do not like to see Reason step down from her throne."

An interesting way to make this clear to students is to have them compare a folk tale as it is told in France with the form the same tale takes in other cultures. Paul Delarue, one of the great folklorists of this century, discusses the French passion for the reasonable in his book Le Conte populaire français.

He points out that the Celts favor a vague, mystic setting for a tale; the Germans prefer the black heart of a sinister forest; but the French place the action in a sunlit farmyard or on the road going past the mill.

The French tale relies less frequently on magical objects than do the tales of the Celts or the Germans. The talking mirror in the German version of Snow White, so picturesquely portrayed by Walt Disney, has disappeared completely from the French version of Blanche Neige.

While German and Celtic tales are endowed with a rich variety of supernatural creatures, the French cast of characters is more restricted. Fairies and ogres make up the usual roster, with a few imaginative exceptions in the Midi and in Brittany. There is a consistent tendency to simplify the supernatural. For example, the tale of the Swan Maidens (Filles-Cygnes) is found in France in many stages of transition from the marvelous to the real. Only a few versions remain where the maidens fly to the forest pool as swans, remove their feathers, and bathe in the form of young ladies. In most French versions the ladies are strictly human. The only trace of the original metamorphosis lies in their names: "La Plume Verte," "La Plume Jaune," or perhaps "Tourterelle." Their robes of feathers become colored dresses. And in the final stage of rationalization one narrator reduces the filmy plumage to a green garter.

Delarue ascribes to the French tale a certain douceur humaine which is lacking in the tales of the Germans. In the Grimms' version of Cinderella the wicked sisters, trying desperately to squeeze into the dainty slipper, finally whittle their feet with a knife to force them into the shoe. It is the oozing of the blood onto their white stockings that reveals the hoax. After the wedding, pigeons swoop down on the hapless sisters and tear out an eye from each. These elements of vengeance and gore are missing from the French versions of Cendrillon. This French desire to eliminate barbaric detail is in accord with their characteristic adherence to a sense of moderation and balance.

This same compulsion to make the irrational rational is seen in a controversy over Cinderella's glass slipper. In Perrault's early version the slipper is made of verre (glass). But Balzac, 150 years later, could not bear the thought of a slipper made of crystal; it was illogical. Finally he worked out a neat theory: the slipper had originally been made of vair, a type of squirrel fur which was formerly used to line clothing; but because the term vair had fallen out of usage, the editor of Perrault's manuscript had mistaken it for verre and thus produced the preposterous glass slipper. The rational French seized upon Balzac's theory with a sigh of relief. Littré wrote in his dictionary under the word vair:

> C'est parce qu'on n'a pas compris ce mot maintenant peu usité qu'on a imprimé dans plusieurs éditions du conte de Cendrillon souliers de verre, ce qui est absurde, au lieu de souliers de vair, c'est-à-dire souliers fourrés de vair.[3]

Littré's "ce qui est absurde" is a perfect reflection of the French preference for the logical. In the world of folklore, however, glass slippers are no more absurd than seven-league boots. Perrault was only conforming to tradition when he wrote "pantoufle de verre," for the glass slipper motif occurs in tales from Spain, Scotland, and Ireland in versions older than that of Perrault and in languages where there is no possibility of a homonym which permits confusion between "slipper of fur" and "slipper of glass."

Other characteristic French attitudes are brought out in their folk literature. The tendency to be suspicious of the motives of others – to distrust anyone in a position of authority – is emphasized repeatedly in proverb, facétie, and tale. True, this is an international folk characteristic – to pit the peasant against the overlord, the cunning boy against the stupid ogre – but it is extremely popular in France, and French folk literature illuminates it better than other literary forms.

There are hundreds of fresh and amusing tales, ideally adapted for listening practice, reading, oral narration, or dramatization, which illustrate the Gallic philosophy that craft and guile go many a mile. And the French sense of humor is nowhere more wittily displayed than in its folklore. L'esprit Gaulois, with its delight in mocking irreverence, can be brought to students through a rich supply of anecdotes aimed at doctors, judges, priests, and landlords.

Of the many folk genres appropriate for classroom use, the proverb is perhaps the most versatile. Its brevity makes it economical; its phraseology makes it memorable. The proverb is worth teaching, for the stranger who is conversant with the proverbial expressions of a people and is able to use them easily has an immediate psychological advantage. Such knowledge is evidence of his interest in the culture and his appreciation of its traditions.

Proverbs provide the student with a built-in repertoire of correct syntactic and morphological patterns. For instance, the student familiar with the proverb "Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée" will have little difficulty remembering that il faut que is followed by soit instead of est.

Proverbs may also be used to focus on certain pronunciation problems. A teacher wishing to drill the sound /r/ might use such proverbs as:

Rira bien qui rira le dernier.
Qui terre a, guerre a.
Qui ne risque rien, n'a rien.

Proverbs may be grouped into related clusters that add interest and humor to a central vocabulary. When a class is learning the inevitable list of parts of the body, for example, these proverbial expressions could complement the study:

Cela coûte les yeux de la tête.
A coeur vaillant, rien d'impossible.
Il a bon dos.
Je donne ma langue au chat.
Ventre affamé n'a point d'oreilles.
Mon petit doigt me l'a dit.
Il prend ses jambes à son cou.

La chair de poule.
La vérité sort de la bouche des enfants.
Les gourmands font leur fosse avec leurs dents.

Proverbs might similarly be grouped to illustrate the important role that food and drink play in French life. The fact that there are so many more proverbs of this kind than there are in English is in itself culturally significant.

Used carefully, proverbs can give new insights into societal values. French méfiance is seen in proverbs like "Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide," and "La défiance est mère de sûreté." The emphasis on individualisme is underscored by such sayings as "Chacun pour soi, Dieu pour tous," and "Mal prie qui s'oublie." The stress on intelligence is seen in such proverbs as "Mieux vaut un sage ennemi qu'un sot ami." The well-known esprit caustique is reflected in "Après la mort, le médecin," and "Aujourd'hui pendu, jugé demain." The French delight in balance and harmony is illustrated by the many proverbs whose form is based on balanced structure: "C'est bonnet blanc et blanc bonnet"; "Bon nageur, bon noyeur"; "Aux grands maux, les grands remèdes"; and "Plus me hâte et plus me gâte." The esprit critique is summarized in "Il n'y a femme, cheval, ni vache / Qui n'ait toujours quelque tache." And the humor of a wine-loving nation reveals itself in the saying, "Tous les méchants sont buveurs d'eau. C'est bien prouvé par le déluge."

It should be emphasized, however, that proverbs cannot be cited glibly to "prove" that a cultural theme exists. "Loin des yeux, loin du coeur" does not "prove" that the French are inconstant in love. But when sociologists agree that a certain trait or value does exist in a society, proverbs may be introduced to underscore the existing trait. Their function in the language class is not to say, "This proverb proves that the trait exists," but rather, "The trait probably exists; this proverb illustrates it in a way that is easy to remember."

A class that is proverb-oriented is a class with a potential for shared insights and for moments of humor which can be gained in few other ways. Quoting proverbs becomes a sort of linguistic game – an intellectual duel between pupil and pupil, between teacher and class. The writer remembers one hectic morning when Pierre, hurrying into the room to beat the tardy bell, tripped over the flag stand and rolled over and over down the aisle. Pony-tailed Marie grinned impishly and proclaimed: "Pierre qui roule n'amasse pas mousse." For the twenty members of the class, that proverb gained instant immortality.

The riddle (devinette) is another folk genre which can contribute to language study. One obvious use is to provide practice with the interrogative form qui est-ce qui:

Qui est-ce qui marche sur la tête?
(Les clous sous les chaussures)

Qui est-ce qui entre partout sans demander permission?
(Le vent)

Qui est-ce qui tremble quand il voit approcher son maître?
(Le pain)

Qui est-ce qui monte au ciel sans ailes et sans échelle?
(La fumée)

Students who become familiar with this form through oral drill are soon making up their own devinettes to stump their classmates.

A genre with great potential for teaching French attitudes toward les autres is the blason populaire, or regional slur. The blason crystallizes in jokes, rhymes, and sayings what in effect constitute regional character studies. The Norman, who sees himself as a man of good sense, endowed with prudence and caution, is regarded by the rest of France as grasping and sly. The Breton is thought of as honest and a man of courage; the Dauphinois as uncouth and canny; the Alsatian – perhaps reflecting his German ties – is noted for his stolid calm; the Gascon is pictured as proud, a great braggart, but charming withal; the Meridional is expansive and gay with an unsurpassed gift of exaggeration. Our students should be familiar with these traditional viewpoints. The blason is an effective introduction.

It has been possible in this limited discussion to include only a few of the folk genres which aid in the teaching of social themes and values. Many other facets of French lore can enrich the cultural offering. Yet most teachers, preoccupied with the development of their own language skills and the acquisition of a formal literary background, do not gain competency in the discipline of folklore. The course in general folklore offered by some universities is too sweeping to be of maximum benefit to the language specialist. The curriculum for teachers of language should include a carefully focused course, based on both literary and anthropological aspects of the culture's folklore, and taught in the foreign language. Only in this way will we fill a significant gap in our cultural preparation.

The spectrum of folk materials can provide a link with the past and a sense of the universal which give the dimension of humanity to the French learning experience. Folklore can help to produce students who, if they do not see the world through French eyes, at least have a sympathetic understanding of how the eyes of the French see the world.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]Howard Lee Nostrand, Chairman, Report of the 1967-68 Committee on a Level-II Standard for Understanding of the Sociocultural Context, presented at the 19th Annual Meeting, Pacific Northwest Conference on Foreign Languages, April 19-20, 1968 (Carroll College), p. 8.

[2]Alan Dundes, ed., The Study of Folklore (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 3.

[3]Paul Delarue, Le Conte populaire français, Vol. I. (Paris: Editions Erasme, 1957), p. 40.